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SUBJECT: GEORGIA: SPEAKER BAKRADZE EXPLAINS POSITION ON PROTESTS TO
CODEL DAVIS

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: Parliamentary Speaker David Bakradze met May 8 with the members of Codel Davis to discuss the current political situation in Georgia. Bakradze explained the GoG's plans to handle the ongoing protests and to implement political reforms. End Summary.

GoG Wants to Break Cycle of Protests

¶2. (SBU) Bakradze told the six visiting members of Congress that the GoG was allowing the protests organized by the non-parliamentary opposition that were blocking many downtown Tbilisi streets to continue for many reasons, but the overarching policy goal was to de-legitimize the use of street protests as the major vehicle for political change in Georgia. Bakradze noted that former Presidents Gamsakhurdia and Shevardnadze were removed via protests and hoped that Georgia could break this destructive cycle. Bakradze said that if Georgia is to take the next step towards becoming a western style democracy, it needed to solve its problems through dialogue and not street ultimatums.

¶3. (SBU) Bakradze readily acknowledged that the Rose Revolution began as a street protest but was quick to draw a distinction between Georgia under President Shevardnadze and the current political climate in Georgia. Bakradze said that protests led to a radicalization of the political elite, and the GoG was single-minded in its desire to discredit the use of protests and ultimatums as an effective way, versus success in the electoral process, to conduct a political dialogue. Bakradze said the goal was to get the discussions into Parliament and out of the street, noting that a sizable number of the protest organizers had refused their seats in parliament in 2008.

Government Will Let the Protests Continue

¶4. (SBU) Bakradze said that the government was going to let the protests continue in order to leave no doubt that the non-parliamentary opposition had ample time to express their views. The added political benefit, according to Bakradze, was that people were tiring of protests and the non-parliamentary opposition was only serving to discredit itself as a legitimate political force with a constructive political message by continuing the now month-long protests.

¶5. (SBU) Bakradze stressed that the government recognized that the November 7, 2007, crackdown had been a mistake and that Georgia's leaders had learned valuable lessons. He said that current GoG policy was to exercise maximum restraint, in part to make clear to its citizens and the international community that it did learn from the mistakes made on November 7, 2007. When asked how long the protests would continue, Bakradze acknowledged that if the non-parliamentary opposition started to block major highways and ports of entry, the GoG would have to react, but that if "they want

to sit on Rustaveli Avenue with a couple thousand people", the GoG had no current plans to stop them. Bakradze expressed hope that the non-parliamentary opposition would engage in meaningful dialogue.

GoG Prepared to Reform on its Own

¶6. (SBU) Bakradze outlined four major areas in which the GoG was willing to negotiate with the radical opposition. Bakradze mentioned constitutional reform, specifically strengthening parliament versus the executive branch; on-going electoral reform (Embassy Note: the non-parliamentary opposition, save one party, has declined participation. End Note); local governance reform, including the direct election of mayors; and judiciary reform. Bakradze reiterated that the GoG was willing to meet without precondition but would not consider resignation in the face of ultimatums.

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